

Working With Reporters: Tips and Traps

Tips...

- **Return calls promptly.** Reporters work on deadlines. During a crisis, the deadlines are measured in minutes.
- **Interview the reporter.** Ask the reporter questions before answering them. What is the story about? Who else have you talked to? What are you going to ask me about?
- **Always tell the truth.**
- **Keep it short and simple.** Boil your ideas down. The typical quote is eight seconds.
- **Start with your conclusion.** Then offer one or two points of explanation or support.
- **Stay with your message.** Plan your points and make them whenever possible. Never go into an interview just to answer a reporter's questions.
- **Be positive.** Good themes for messages: what you do (or did), why it's important, what it will accomplish, what it has already accomplished, and the need for action.
- **Answer the questions you know.** It's OK to say you don't know; promise to have someone get the answer; then follow through. Never speculate. Never speak for other people or groups.
- **Relate answers to people.** What does this mean to people, and why should they care?
- **Show them you care.** You are talking about people, not data, infrastructure, process, or "acceptable/projected mortality rates." Show compassion and concern for safety.
- **Avoid "bureaucratese" and technical talk.** Do NOT describe death as "a negative public health outcome."

Working With Reporters: Tips and Traps, continued

Traps...

- **Never go “off the record.”** Don’t go off the record with a reporter. Assume what you say will be in the report. Whenever you are wearing a microphone or when a TV camera is nearby, never say anything you do not want recorded.
- **Your personal opinion.** Be careful. Unless your opinion happens to be the same as your agency’s or your supervisor’s, this is tricky. Get the subject back on track.
- **Keep your cool.** Don’t argue with reporters. Keep repeating your key messages and correcting erroneous statements. Take a break if necessary.
- **Manipulating you into talking.** Reporter says if you can’t answer, he’ll have to go with someone else’s side of the story. Honestly explain why you can’t talk now, but keep the door open for a future story.
- **The pregnant pause.** Don’t fill the void. Stop when you’ve said what you want to say. You are not obligated to fill silence when you’re being interviewed.
- **Blaming others.** No thanks.